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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development:
Sub-theme: the role of volunteerism in the promotion of social development

Statement submitted by the International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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The International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres (IFS) is a membership association of national, regional and local non-governmental multipurpose community-based organizations working to strengthen local communities around the world. Through its members, it provides social services at the local level and represents community concerns at national and international levels. Voluntarism has played a significant role in the settlement movement and in the empowerment of local communities. The following statement is based on the long and varied experience of IFS with volunteerism.

The issue of volunteerism must be considered from several perspectives. From the point of view of the community, volunteerism provides an opportunity for the citizens of a democratic society to participate of their own free will to build their own communities. The settlement movement, through its varied use of volunteers, provides examples of both the value of volunteering to the community and to the individuals concerned. The experience of IFS provides examples of almost every kind of volunteerism, varying from Board membership at every level (international, national and local) to the direct provision of a range of social services. However, voluntarism, to be effective, must be based on agreed principles, goals and objectives.

The roots of volunteerism/voluntarism go back to the social ills created by the industrial revolution and the input of differing social and economic policies of Governments throughout the world. Moreover, the role of volunteers has changed over the years, sometimes in accord with demographic changes, sometimes based on economic needs and sometimes on political or cultural policy.

Today voluntarism seems to be in the forefront of the campaign for global awareness. In many countries the cause of increased participation is the crisis in their social protection systems. Where Governments — national or local — are not providing or funding adequate social services, volunteer organizations find themselves attempting to fill the gap. For this activity they must find funds — and make use of volunteers both as advocates and as workers. Often, even in countries where voluntarism has long been accepted as an element of social policy, lack of training and appropriate guidelines has meant inadequate operations. Another cause of the growth of volunteerism is the economic globalization of many areas of employment, with the accompanying increase in poverty which in turn requires volunteer assistance from the community. In addition, demographic changes, especially but not only in the developing countries, are calling for more aid and more participation, both for young and old.

The current growth of volunteerism emphasizes the need to consider the problems involved and to reach international agreement on the principles which should govern voluntarism in its broadest scope. The suggestions of IFS with respect to such principles are:

(a) Volunteerism is a fundamental value of democratic society. It is active citizenship; individuals accept responsibility for social and civic affairs — whether directly or by support of voluntary service organizations;

(b) The local community is the basis for voluntary action. A healthy, secure, economically strong community includes a strong voluntary sector (voluntary non-profit organizations);

(c) Volunteerism begins with instilling values in children and young people such as sharing with others, helping others who need aid, keeping the environment healthy and clean, developing projects and participating in community service;

(d) Voluntary action values diversity and the full spectrum of differences in the community — age, ethnicity, capability, culture, religion, socio-economic background, education and training;

(e) Volunteerism benefits both the volunteers themselves and the causes they support. Volunteer work is a significant experience in personal development (and frequently professional development as well);

(f) Volunteers are "willing" and "non-salaried". However, to make volunteers effective, they need to be trained, supported, valued and recognized. A volunteer programme requires skilled volunteer management and adequate resources. Volunteers must not be used as inexpensive substitutes for regular employees.

IFS suggests that the objectives for the International Year of the Volunteer should be:

(a) Support for the growth of volunteerism as a positive factor in social policy;

(b) Support for the role of volunteers in community actions;

(c) Development of guidelines for volunteer management (including training and definition of roles appropriate for volunteers — boards, professional activities, productive employment, attendance etc.);

(d) Definition of the nature of voluntary activities and responsibilities;

(e) Elimination of the many barriers discouraging voluntarism and impeding community development (such as costly building requirements and other local regulations);

(f) Encouragement of governmental support for voluntary action through supportive legislation and funding to voluntary non-profit organizations.

IFS, in consequence of its own experience with the use of volunteers, also recommends that a study be made of the issue of travel expenses (local as well as national or international) and stipends for volunteer service. It is the inability to meet such costs that frequently bars individuals from volunteering their skill in the community. By contrast, there are many voluntary agencies which operate entirely on the basis of volunteers and have no funds to meet such expenses.

IFS is prepared to make available information and examples of both the challenges faced and the portents for volunteerism in the field of social service, including the use of volunteer training programmes as well as their supervision and the solutions found for issues such as funding and the hesitancy of some trade unions as well as professional staff to accept volunteers as co-workers.

IFS hopes that these suggestions will be considered by the Commission for Social Development.